

he had called for the medical examiners board and the Federation of State Medical Boards to find a cheaper alternative to the test.

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

Depo-Provera contraceptive may increase risk of cardiovascular disease

The long acting contraceptive Depo-Provera (depot medroxy-progesterone acetate, DMPA) may increase the risk of heart disease in women taking the drug for more than a year, new research has suggested.

The study, due to be published on 17 September in *Circulation*, the journal of the American Heart Association, and already available online (www.circ.ahajournals.org/), shows that the contraceptive can impair arterial responsiveness to increased blood flow as a result of endothelial cell abnormality.

Lead author Professor Dudley Pennell of the Royal Brompton Hospital, London, says that long term users with risk factors for heart disease "would be wise to review" with their doctor whether to continue using the drug.

DMPA is one of several long acting hormonal contraceptive methods used by women in developing countries, where local health services are often inadequate or non-existent. In developed nations, where non-compliance may be problematic in teenagers, doctors have found the contraceptive useful because it does not have to be taken daily (bmj.com/cgi/eletters/321/7259/461).

The authors admit that the study numbers are small and that the results "do not provide direct evidence that DMPA is linked to coronary artery disease." But they warn that their findings "may have clinical implications, in particular with regard to the prevailing recommendation to use DMPA in women with cardiovascular disease."

Xavier Bosch *Barcelona*

Indian government denies health impact of brown cloud

Scientists in India are claiming that the Asian brown cloud is not something specific to Asia and does not have a knock-on effect on pollution related mortality.

The cloud, almost the size of the United States, has been described by experts from the United Nations' environment programme as a blanket of brown haze 3 km deep. They say that it hangs over a vast territory encompassing the northern Indian Ocean, India, Pakistan, and much of South Asia, South East Asia, and China for as long as four winter months a year.

The cloud is caused mostly by burning fossil fuels. It is supposedly causing lower temperatures and changing precipitation patterns, which is leading to floods and droughts, threatening food safety, and causing thousands of deaths owing to respiratory illnesses.

In a sharp reaction to the UN report, India's environment ministry has stated that the report's conclusions were "unfounded and there is no scientific evidence to suggest any linkage between the haze and its impact on weather patterns."

India has also questioned the report's statement about the effects of transcontinental movement of the Asian brown cloud. According to the UN press statement, the pollution that is forming the cloud could be leading to "several hundreds of thousands" of premature deaths as a result of higher levels of respiratory diseases. Studies show that mortality was rising along with the rise in pollution, it added.

Reacting to this, India's ministry points out that the UN group did not study the health impacts of the Asian brown cloud and the UN report itself does not link the cloud directly with mortality.

Sanjay Kumar *New Delhi*

The UN report is at www.rtcap.unep.org/abc/impactstudy/

Psychiatric Association to investigate abuse in China

Mirza Muminovic *BMJ*

The World Psychiatric Association intends to investigate charges that psychiatric hospitals in China are being used to silence political and religious dissidents. A team of experts from the association hopes to visit China and report back by May 2003.

The decision was taken during the association's recent triennial world congress in Yokohama after psychiatrists and human rights groups put forward a resolution calling on China to cease these abuses and fully cooperate with an investigation. The systematic psychiatric abuses in China are rampant, they say, and may be even more severe than they were in the former Soviet Union.

Britain's Royal College of Psychiatrists has demanded a more independent commission and has urged the World Psychiatric Association to consider barring the Chinese Psychiatric Association if evidence of abuse is found.

Before the congress, Human Rights Watch and the Geneva

Initiative on Psychiatry published a report that compared the treatment of dissidents in Chinese mental asylums to similar abuses in the former Soviet Union.

The report outlined the steps that the Chinese government should take to end these abuses.

Extensive documentary evidence shows that the political use of psychiatry was much more common in China during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) than in either the former Soviet Union or China today. But official psychiatric theory in China continues to condone the involuntary treatment in custodial mental asylums of numerous dissidents and non-conformists, including independent labour organisers and whistleblowers. □

The Human Rights Watch report, *Dangerous Minds: Political Psychiatry in China Today and its Origins in the Mao Era*, is available from <http://hrw.org/reports/2002/china02/china0802.pdf> or ordered at www.hrw.org

Old smallpox vaccination may still protect

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

Smallpox vaccination given more than 35 years ago may still offer important protection, says a new report based on laboratory studies by immunologists at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (2002;347:689-90). The report is important because of fears that terrorists may use smallpox virus as a weapon.

After smallpox was declared eliminated by the World Health Organization in 1980, immunisation stopped, leaving most younger people vulnerable. The smallpox virus is said to be held only at secure sites in the United States and Russia, but rogue scientists may have taken it to other nations. Stocks of smallpox vaccine are now being urgently replenished.

When smallpox was still endemic it was recommended that revaccinations occur frequently—as often as every year for hospital workers who may be exposed.

Dr Jeffrey Frelinger, professor and chairman of the Department of Immunology at the University of North Carolina, and postdoctoral researcher Dr Mohammed Garba looked at the CD8 T lymphocyte responses to vaccinia virus. Their study included one unvaccinated person, four people who had been vaccinated in the last five years because they worked with vaccinia virus, and nine people who had been vaccinated from six to more than 35 years previously. □



Mass vaccination programme